

2

All of Our Motivation Comes from Within Ourselves

Basic to control theory is the belief that *all* of our behavior is our constant attempt to satisfy one or more of five basic needs that are written into our genetic structure. *None* of what we do is caused by any situation or person outside of ourselves. Simple as this is to say, it is perhaps the most difficult change that we have to make in our thinking if we wish to stop using the incorrect s-r theory that most of us have believed all of our lives. Have you, for example, ever seriously questioned your belief that you answer a telephone because it rings or stop your car because a traffic light turns red? Or that a student learns because you teach him or stops running in the corridor because you told him to walk? Following a lifetime of s-r thinking, most of us believe that the behaviors in the previous examples are caused by someone or something (the stimulus) outside the behaving person and that what he or she does is a response or reaction to that stimulus.

Control theory explains that this is not what happens at all: What goes on in the outside world never “stimulates” us to do anything. All of our behavior, simple to complex, is our best attempt to control ourselves to satisfy our needs, but, of course, controlling ourselves is almost always related to our constant attempts to control what goes on around us. For example, it is how I move my hands and feet that controls my car and it is how well I study that determines my school success. It is also important that you understand that the word *control* as used here does not mean “to dominate.” It means only that we attempt to act

as best as we can to satisfy our needs. For example, we *control* our car when we drive it or we *control* our anger when we are frustrated; we don't *dominate* our car or our anger.

Therefore, it follows that if our behavior always arises from within ourselves, never from an outside stimulus, that all we can do is *act*; as living creatures we never *react*. Once you accept control theory you will give up the words *react* and *respond*, because neither we nor any living creature ever does. If we answer a phone, it is an *action* we choose because we want to control the phone so we can converse; it is not a *reaction* to the ring. I recognize that any frequent action that we choose quickly and without much thought is easy to think of as a reaction, but automatic as it may seem to be, it is still a choice. It may be a very quick choice if it has served us well for a long time, but in the beginning, for example, when we first heard a phone ring, we had to think and consider what to do. Even now, if we have something better to do, we do not automatically "react." We think for a moment. Do we want to answer or not? A dead machine, such as a telephone answering machine, cannot choose. Therefore, it never acts, it only reacts or responds to the ring as it is programmed by its designer to do. Unlike us, it has no choice; like all machines, it is a true slave and has no control over its destiny.

In the same vein, stopping our car is not a reaction to a red light, and students neither learn nor stop running just because of you. You know you do not always stop at a red light. In a life or death emergency, you might judge that it was worth taking a chance and go through. You are also well aware that on many occasions you have taught your heart out, and still some students have chosen not to learn. And you have told some students to stop running until you were tense with frustration, and still they continued on their merry way because running was more need fulfilling at that moment than walking.

While stimulus-response theory at first glance may seem to explain usual or expected behavior, like stopping at a red light, it does not come close to explaining the unexpected. And capable students who refuse to work in school are to most of you, no matter how long you have struggled to teach them, displaying unexpected behavior.

* Control theory, which claims that what is going on inside the student, rather than the outside situation, is the cause of all behavior, explains that, regardless of your best efforts, these students choose not to work in your class, because it does not satisfy their needs to do so. Only when we learn more than most of us know now about what does satisfy students will we stop exhausting ourselves trying to *make* them apply themselves when they are frustrated. With this knowledge we should be able to restructure our classes so that many more students will choose to work and learn because they find it satisfying to do so.

The tendency to believe what we see or what seems obvious is an overwhelming human tendency. When Pavlov saw dog after dog salivate when he rang a bell, he concluded that it was caused by the bell, when in fact it was because the dogs were hungry and were sensibly getting ready to eat when they heard what had previously been the dinner bell. It was the hunger inside the dog and the fact that they were tethered in place so that they had no other sensible choices that made them decide to salivate so quickly that Pavlov wrongly concluded that it was an automatic or conditioned response. If he had chosen cats, a much less predictable animal where both food and bells are concerned, it is unlikely that he would have come to the same conclusion.

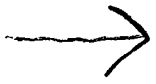
The control theory explanation of behavior is that *we always choose to do what is most satisfying to us at the time*. If what we choose is consistently satisfying, we will choose it with less and less deliberation, but even if it is as quick as a flash, it is an action, not an automatic reaction. Only machines react automatically. The bell did not make

want the car but, as long as he does, he will choose to make an effort to learn whatever is being taught no matter how well or badly it is presented. This means that we cannot assume that school is satisfying just by observing a student working. On the other hand, if you see a student not working in school, you can safely assume that what the school is offering (either the material, the teaching or both) is less satisfying than whatever that student may be doing at the time.

* Even if the student's life away from school is bleak and miserable, he will work if what he finds in school is satisfying. For eleven years I worked in a reform school where young women were in custody because they had committed crimes. When I became acquainted with their backgrounds, it was clear that most had suffered hardships and abuse beyond belief. Still, almost all of them applied themselves in our school. Their miserable histories did not stand in the way of what they now found satisfying. *

When a student is doing badly in school, we too often point our fingers at a dismal home when the reason really is that the student does not find school satisfying enough for him to make an effort. There is no doubt that a student who cannot satisfy his needs at home may come to your class hungry for love or recognition and impatient that he can't quickly get what he wants. Rather than become discouraged, you should realize that if he can begin to satisfy his needs in your class and if you are patient enough with his impatience, he has a good chance to learn enough to lead a productive life despite his home life.

Control theory is a hopeful theory. It teaches that all any of us can do and, therefore need to do, is attempt to fulfill our needs now. We can never go back into our past and satisfy a need that was not satisfied. For example, we can nourish ourselves today, but as hungry as we may have been then, we cannot eat a meal that we missed last week. Therefore, we should not hold past failures against students if they make up the work now. If a student failed math last year but this year is doing well in an equivalent



the dogs salivate any more than terrorism and counterterrorism (overwhelming “stimuli” if you believe in stimuli) will bring peace to the Mideast.



For thousands of years we have wrongly concluded that what we do *to* or *for* people can make them behave the way we want even if it does not satisfy them. And for the same length of time, history confirms that this wrong belief has led nation after nation into political disasters. (For some excellent examples, see historian Barbara Tuchman's *The March of Folly*.¹) As much as we would like to see more students working in school, if we cling to stimulus-response theory as the way to achieve this, we will be disappointed. Coercion will no more motivate students than it does nations.

If what is being taught does not satisfy the needs about which a student is currently most concerned, it will make little difference how brilliantly the teacher teaches—the student will not work to learn. When I worked in a Watts school in the sixties, we had to feed the hungry children a good breakfast or they would not pay attention. After they were fed, they were eager to work. Simple as this seems, it is a difficult control theory lesson to learn because for so long we have believed that if we teach harder, we can cause students to learn regardless of what they may want at the time. Teachers are well aware that hungry students think of food, lonely students look for friends and powerless students for attention far more than they look for knowledge.

Anytime you see a person doing anything, you can be sure that what she is doing is her best attempt to satisfy some current need. This means that when you see a student learning in school, that student is satisfying some need by doing schoolwork. While it is most likely that the student is working because he finds school satisfying, it may be that the effort he is making has little or nothing to do with school. The student may be working for good grades because a parent has promised him a car that he wants and he has to have good grades to get it. He has to